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TAGS: PREL PHUM FR CU

SUBJECT: FRENCH CUBA POLICY: HAVE THEY SEEN THE LIGHT?

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) MFA Cuba Desk Officer Eric Chaux provided a readout to Poloff October 17 on the October 11 meeting between French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy and Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque. Chaux echoed the official press release in stating that the visit was "devoted exclusively to the human rights situation in Cuba" and that Douste-Blazy had delivered a strong message demanding the release of dissidents. The French had adopted a "constructive dialogue" approach, Chaux explained, after the EU sanctions of 2003 had failed to produce tangible results. Cuban gestures at the end of 2004 (prior to the EU vote on suspending sanctions) and the relatively successful May 20 dissident congress had raised French hopes that such engagement could effect change. However, the July 22nd crackdown and current conditions in Cuba -- which Chaux characterized as similar to the situation in March 2003 -- were "provocations" that had convinced the GoF that the Castro regime had "crossed the red line." According to Chaux, Douste-Blazy had informed Perez Roque that the GoC had "played long enough" and that the GoF expected concrete actions, namely the liberation of dissidents.

¶2. (C) Comment: A genuine shift in France's Cuba policy may be in the making. This would be a welcome change, as the GoF has been second only to Spain in trying to water down EU efforts to confront Castro. The GoF was the first EU country to invite GoC officials to its national day, without similarly inviting dissidents to the same event, following the suspension of EU sanctions. The GoF added injury to insult by providing Perez Roque a platform at the event from which to speak. No such platform, however, was provided following the October 11 meeting in Paris; Perez Roque did not speak to reporters afterwards, and the Cuban Embassy in Paris had no comment on the discussion. The silence on the part of the GoC suggests the French were indeed forceful in their demands. Whether this recent dress-down is an indication of a significant policy shift -- one that will be followed up with further action -- remains to be seen. End Comment.

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